



## Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf and the Moravian Brethren

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### Introduction

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Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760) was a charismatic German nobleman who permitted a group of Moravian refugees to settle on his lands in 1722. Within ten years, the Moravian Brethren had grown under Zinzendorf's patronage and leadership, and they began a missionary movement which would in time take them all over the world. Up until the mid-1750s, the movement was regarded as a radical and subversive group within Europe. This was mainly due to their theology of 'blood and wounds' which placed a particular emphasis on the crucified Saviour, their belief in Jesus's presence in the community, subversion of feudal social structures, and high mobility. All of these arose from their end times beliefs, and they all intensified and developed in the mid-1730s. Zinzendorf himself was also regarded with extreme suspicion for a host of reasons, among which were his claimed close relationship with the Saviour with whom he claimed to converse daily, his Bible translations, his teachings on marriage and gender roles, and his subversion of his aristocratic rank by associating with Moravian artisans and peasants. After Zinzendorf's death the movement was institutionalised, and many of its eschatological and socially offensive elements downplayed. The apocalyptic aspect of Zinzendorf in terms of divine revelation concerns his immediate access to the Saviour, who, it was believed, was present in his community and guided it every step of the way. This is in line with the cosmic point of view presented in many ancient apocalyptic writings, where the true order and meaning of the world is generally hidden but revealed to a select few, indicating an open line of communication between heaven and earth. Zinzendorf believed that they were living in the end of days, and that the community of believers was a foretaste of what would happen when the last days arrived.

### Zinzendorf, the Early Years

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Zinzendorf was born in 1700 into an Austrian noble family. His father died the year he was born, and so he grew up with his maternal grandmother Henrietta Catharina von Gersdorff (1648–1726) in Grosshennersdorf, in the Oberlausitz region of Saxony. Here he encountered some of the leading figures of Pietism, the awakening movement which swept through northern and eastern Europe in the aftermath of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). Henrietta von Gersdorff was one of Pietism's most fervent sponsors,

and through her the young count met two of Pietism's founding fathers, Philipp Jacob Spener (1635–1705) and August Hermann Francke (1663–1727), who institutionalised Pietism in the town of Halle with a number of schools and an orphanage. When the time came for his schooling, Zinzendorf was sent to Halle, to attend the Paedagogium Regium (1710–1716), the school for aristocratic boys which Francke had established as part of his educational programme. Zinzendorf was thus raised within the tradition of Pietism, which emphasised the heartfelt conversion experience of the individual believer over and against church dogmatism. Later in life, Zinzendorf would refer to this time as one where the Saviour spoke to him and his close friend, Friedrich von Watteville, words which would form into concrete plans, not only for building the town of Herrnhut, but the more global community of the Moravian Brethren.

After studying law in Wittenberg (1716–1719), Zinzendorf went through the appropriate rite of passage for a young aristocratic male of his time, namely a cavalier's tour of Europe (1719–1721). Zinzendorf settled in Dresden and was appointed councillor to the court of the Elector of Saxony. In 1722, he bought the estate in Berthelsdorf from his grandmother, and married his first wife, Erdmuth Dorothea von Reuss (1700–1756). This was the same year the Moravians were given permission to settle upon his lands and begin construction of the village of Herrnhut. Zinzendorf, however, largely remained in his position in Dresden for the next five years, while the village was taking shape. He travelled back and forth but did not engage himself fully in the goings on in Herrnhut before 1727, when he took charge.

## The Congregation in Herrnhut

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After 1727, the congregation itself began to take shape, and distanced itself more and more from Halle, until the final break came in 1738. The reasons for this break are multi-layered (Schneider 2004), but it meant that Herrnhut took its own distinct path. One of these was extensive lay-missionary activity, which began in the early 1730s. Another was the choir structure, which took formal shape in the early 1740s. The so-called 'Choirs,' the main organisational form of the Moravian communities, were groups arranged according to sex and marital status. Generally, there were eight Choirs: Children, Girls, Boys, Single Sisters, Single Brothers, Married Couples, Widows, and Widowers. Through speeches and rituals, each of these groups were professed to stand in a unique relationship with the Saviour. For the women, it was mainly in a submissive spousal relation; for the men, primarily as one of identity, on the grounds of their physical likeness to Jesus the man.

The subsequent period, up to the early 1750s, is the focus of the discussion below, since these are theologically the most productive times for Zinzendorf and the movement. From 1736 until 1747, Zinzendorf was banned from Saxony by the privy council. He had been accused of stealing serfs from other estates, religious separatism, and generally being a social nuisance. During this time, Zinzendorf travelled incessantly. He was in the West Indies in 1739, in Pennsylvania in 1742, and several times in England, where the Moravians had established the Fetter Lane Society, a hub of religious separatism where the Wesleys attended (Podmore 1998), as well as the parents of William Blake (Schuchard 2007). He was often in the Netherlands, and once or twice in Switzerland, Copenhagen, and Riga. When in Germany, he stayed in Marienborn in the Wetterau region in Western Germany, where the second settlement, Herrnhag, had been established in 1738. He only really settled (more or less) after 1755, when he was more often in Herrnhut than not. Erdmuth died in 1756, and the following year Zinzendorf married Anna Nitschmann

(1715–1760), one of the first Moravian immigrants to Herrnhut, and from an early age, a leading figure among the women of the community. He died in May 1760 after a brief illness. Anna Nitschmann died ten days later.

## Geographical, Social, and Political Context

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*In a time in which a revolutionary secularisation of the Christian historical consciousness completes itself and a new world-religiosity breaks through, he [Zinzendorf] tried to develop a new conceptualisation of religiosity, which received its formative powers from the end of history, from the Eschaton. In a turbulent age, determined by centrifugal powers, he sought to create a new security. (Beyreuther 1963, xi)*

With this somewhat heavy-handed quote, church historian Erich Beyreuther situates Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf and his theological entrepreneurship within a whirlwind of secularisation and dispersion. Zinzendorf is characterised as a rock rising above chaos, as a figure attempting to create a new steadfastness in an age in which all that is solid melted into air, when everything seemed to be dissolving beyond the control of everyday life. The epistemological crisis to which Beyreuther is referring—as ‘revolutionary secularisation’—is firmly connected to the socio-economic changes and developments of capitalist modernity, such as the emergence of civil society and the implementation of a global economy. What Beyreuther refers to as a revolution is a shift in the place of religion, which now becomes conditioned by the world and its political powers. As a contrast to this, for Beyreuther, lamentable development, he sees Zinzendorf as attempting to create an eschatological religiosity which would function as a new steadfastness.

Zinzendorf lived in a time when the new world was emerging within the collapsing feudal social structure, which undoubtedly produced a sense of urgency and crisis. In the Oberlausitz where he grew up, a re-feudalisation had taken place in the wake of the carnage of the Thirty Years’ War, but at the same time, the global economy had also made its presence felt, making this re-feudalisation an odd mix of what was passing and what was to come. Another thing which characterised this period was the steady flow of immigrants from Catholic Bohemia and Moravia to the now Protestant states, such as Saxony and Brandenburg. These religious refugees were part of the pre-Reformation movement in Bohemia in the fifteenth century, the United Brotherhood church, connected with Jan Hus. After the implementation of Catholic rule in the Bohemia, the United Brotherhood church was forced to go underground, or into exile. This is also how the Moravian Brethren began, when in 1722 a group of thirty German-speaking Moravian refugees turned up on Zinzendorf’s estate in Berthelsdorf. After Herrnhut was established, the influx of Moravian refugees and spiritual seekers from all over Europe came to Herrnhut.

One of the results of the brotherly agreement and seigneurial statutes signed between Zinzendorf as lord and the ever-increasing residents of Herrnhut was that they were granted free subject status, which meant that they were able to travel freely. From the very early days of the movement, the members would travel around as ‘witnesses’ or missionaries. These were mainly artisans, and this army of lay preachers was one of the distinct features of the Moravian Brethren. Zinzendorf was also very well connected among the

nobility of Europe and his rank meant that, for example, the early Moravian missionaries to the Danish colonies were introduced at the Danish court.

The social changes that were making themselves felt in these years particularly affected the established clergy, who were disturbed by the popularity of Pietism and especially by radical Pietism. Zinzendorf and his circle were accused of being in league with the devil and wanting to overturn state and church. While these accusations had some traction in the first twenty years of the community's history, they eventually faded into the background, as the entrepreneurial success of the Moravian Brethren caught the eye of the authorities.

## Zinzendorf and his Saviour: Divine Inspiration and Revelation

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As outlined above, Zinzendorf's early beliefs were heavily shaped by Pietism in its institutional form, closely connected with Francke's Halle. Indeed, Zinzendorf never lost his attachment to formal institutional structures, and Herrnhut was a heavily structured community, as were the places created in its image. This was in distinction to other radical pietist movements, such as the Schwarzenau Brethren, the Society of Mother Eve, and the Labadists who were expecting the imminent end of the world, and thus did not settle down in quite the same way. Paradoxically, it was precisely during the years of increased institutionalisation and tightening hierarchical structuring that the most fervent socially transformative and revelatory practices occurred.

Zinzendorf generally understood himself and his community as partaking in a cosmic battle with the always present forces of Satan, and in the 1720s he himself had been accused of being the Beast of the Apocalypse (Peucker, forthcoming). However, I want to focus on developments taking place from the late 1730s which I see as decidedly apocalyptic in nature: first, the increased focus on Jesus as the slaughtered lamb and the development of 'blood and wounds theology'; second, the discernment of the Saviour's real and actual presence in the community and involvement with daily affairs, large and small; and third, the mystery of marriage. These are all features which not only borrow elements and imagery from New Testament eschatology, but also develop them in a way that captured some of the angst and zeitgeist of the times of trouble.

In 1741 a significant change took place in the organisation of the larger Moravian community. Leonhard Dober (1706-1766), General Elder of the whole church, resigned from his office because of the overwhelming amount of work with the rapidly growing community and its missions. To decide his replacement, 'the lot' was used. This practice meant drawing lots to reveal the will of Jesus, which would express itself as an answer to the proposed question (yes/no/blank), a practice which had begun around 1727 (Sommer 1998, 269). In 1741 it was revealed that Jesus himself desired to take Dober's place as General Elder. As Dietrich Meyer points out, this unusual step meant that the intimate relation between Zinzendorf and Christ became constitutive of the community as a whole, and 'as a logical consequence thereof, *that the invisible real presence of Christ was taken seriously*' (Meyer 2009, 46, my italics).

Zinzendorf, as the right-hand man of the Saviour, thus became the executor of the Saviour's will, which served to strengthen the close relationship between them, as experienced by Zinzendorf. No matter was

deemed too small or insignificant for the Saviour to decide, and the lot was cast every month to determine a host of everyday and organisational matters.

This experience of the Saviour's presence in the Moravian communities of the 1740s and 50s meant that Jesus was regarded as walking among his community with broken eyes, pale lips, and perforated hands, breathing his grave-breath on his believers, and letting them take refuge in and nourishment from the wound in his side. These images are captured in the two following quotes. The first is from a speech to the children and the second from a speech to all the Sisters:

*The heart hears the softest greeting, sometimes it receives a kiss from the pale lips, how strong does that feel, sometimes an awareness is sensed, as it was to Emmaus, a grave-breath, a quiet, gentle breeze from the precious heart-garden of my death. (11 March 1758, GNC 78 [562-70, unpublished archival material])*

*his [Jesus's] dear presence is our daily fortune and new every day, apart from, that we with the air and breath enter into the leaven of his corpse and have the sprinkling of his blood's nectar, and become one spirit with him, that, if that were not a daily matter, our soul could not subsist nor could life be retained, then we still come together bodily, the corpse, the true martyred body, which is given for us, will be transformed in our bones and flesh every month, we will be kneaded together with him, in essence sacramentally, corporally, bodily, and the blood, which ran from the marks, will be drunk with thirsty souls, and not with any less certainty than if we stood under his cross, placed our mouths on the sidehole and sucked. (14 May 1758, GNB [unpublished archival material])*

This presence was cultivated through speeches, singing, and liturgy. This figure is mainly Zinzendorf's idea, and as far as I can tell, the corpse-focus disappeared after Zinzendorf's death in 1760, but the idea of a human Jesus and his personal relation to his people continued to prevail, and influenced thinkers more widely in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Schleiermacher and Gustaf Dalman.

Around the same time as the presence of Jesus-as-corpse was wandering the halls, the blood and wounds theology became more manifest. A famous quote from one of the senior members of the community illustrates this shift in communal discourse:

*Back then, redemption was preached, now it is the Wounds and the blood; back then, faith was described, now the Lamb is described; back then, the foundation, now the elements, in which we live and weave, where we swim and bathe ... Back then, we were told the grace God had shown us, now it is told to one another what the little lamb looks like, how wide the little side [the sidewound] had opened, how it was mistreated, torn, dug out with nails, how one sees in Spirit how it flowed from the loins ...; then, one took pleasure in mainly ones achieved grace, but now, mainly, that one is a sinner. (reproduced in Petterson, forthcoming)*

The best-known manifestation of this theology is the so-called 'Litany of Wounds' (*Wundenlitaney*), composed by Zinzendorf, his son Christel (1727-1752), and Zinzendorf's future son-in-law Johannes Langguth (1718-1788) in 1744. The 'Litany of Wounds' is based on the dying words of Brother Johann Nitsche, who died in Herrnhut in the last week of 1743, calling upon the wounds of Jesus and having visions thereof. In the communal enactment of and participation in the Litany, which was performed antiphonally on a weekly basis, the members of the congregation appropriate the visionary experience of Nitsche and his witness to the wounds:

*Glistening wounds of Jesus*

*You make my heart a dazzling candle of grace before the rays and lightning.*

*Soft wounds of Jesus*

*I like lying calm, gently, and quiet and warm. What should I do? I crawl to you.*

and so on. The litany ends on this note:

*Our wounds of Jesus*

*Upon which all crowds, young and old, great and small, travel. Whoever has faith.*

*My wounds of Jesus,*

*Mine, yes mine! To me it is then, as though you were there entirely for my heart alone.*

*At the end of all trouble,*

*Anoint us, you red wounds.*

*In the meantime, I believe the death-streaked eyes, the spit-dripped mouth, the fire-baptised corpse, the thorn-scratched head, the furrows on the back. Until I, at the proper hour, can see in my flesh the body wounded for me, on which we build so firmly, and greet close by, the works in his hand and feet. (Atwood 2004, 233-37)*

The freshness of the wounds testifies to the presence of the crucified Saviour in the community, and the immediate (and unmediated) nature of the relationship between the individual believer and his or her Saviour.

The final important element of the theology of the 1740s is that of marriage and the gender-roles within this relationship. From the mid-1740s, Zinzendorf professed the idea of a mystery of marriage (*Ehegeheimnis*), the central feature of which is the eschatological event of copulation between wife and husband, (i.e., between the community/church and its heavenly bridegroom, the Saviour, as expressed in Ephesians 5 [Vogt 2011; Petterson 2014]). This copulation between the eternal bridegroom and his bride is copied and enacted in marriages between men and women in the Moravian Brethren, where the man

represents the Saviour and the woman represents the church. A central feature in this mystery was the transformation of earthly men into their original state as sisters in the hereafter, whereby they would join the collective of the bride of the Lamb, something which is regularly presented in Zinzendorf's speeches to the married couples. The male Moravian members, then, are only incarnated as men, but have female souls so that they can become part of the bride of the Lamb when the time comes.

There is, however, little clarity as to when this time comes, or how it will manifest itself.

The deceased of the community are still present as the community above, in heaven. In one of his speeches to the Single Brothers' Choir, Zinzendorf mentions how all the Single Brothers are so blessed in their Choir that all they want to do is leave their bodies to reach 'the upper rows of maidens, to our blessed Christel [who died in 1753], and to so many other Choir relations in the community up there' (Zinzendorf 1760). Into this upper community—the realm of the spirit—the widows have privileged insight, because they are already of the correct bridal gender, and because they have had sexual experience with their deceased husbands, and thus know of the pleasures that await them with the Lamb (Zinzendorf 1756). Finally, the unmarried women, the Single Sisters, are an image of the pure bride, and Zinzendorf describes the sister-houses as 'Dwellings of peace and blessing, heaven on earth, the courtyards of the lord, which only need the walls to be removed, then the bridal chamber stands there with the Bridegroom within' (Zinzendorf 1757).

The emphasis on the Lamb, its blood and its wounds, and the developing idea of transformed gender identities and marriage spun out of control towards the end of the 1740s in Herrnhag. Here, Zinzendorf's son, Christian Renatus, otherwise known as Christel, was the leader of the Single Brothers' choir. A hugely charismatic figure, he was as divisive as his father, and took Zinzendorf's ideas to their logical extremes. This period (ca. 1747–1751) is commonly known as 'the Sifting Time,' an expression Zinzendorf used to designate times of tribulation within the community, of which this particular one was the most famous. The expression comes from Luke's Gospel (22:31), where Jesus says to Simon that 'Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat'. Much of the material pertaining to the Sifting Time was subsequently destroyed by the Moravian leadership, and the exact nature of what happened has until recently been shrouded in mystery and speculation. In his 2015 book *A Time of Sifting*, Paul Peucker has convincingly argued that certain groups within the Moravian Church, led by Christel, had taken the logical consequences of Zinzendorf's theology and declared themselves to be in their eschatological state of perfection and sinlessness—namely as 'sisters'—and consequently engaged in acts of sexual transgression (Peucker 2006; 2015, 122–28). The rumours and reports of wantonness, indecencies, and licentiousness in Herrnhag travelled far and wide and culminated in the disbanding of the leadership in Herrnhag, a stern letter by Zinzendorf (analysed in Atwood 1996), and a stronger level of control, although the elements which caused the problems in the first place (namely the mystery of marriage, its gender fluidity, and its emphasis on intercourse) remained in place until Zinzendorf's death in 1760.

## Unresolved Matters and Further Questions

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Zinzendorf was a highly original, supple, and holistic thinker. This is best captured in the works that deal with his poetic and mystical expressions, where we glimpse the strong currents that inform his worldview.



As his biographer Karl August Varnhagen von Ense wrote:

*Behind the history of the state, between the storms of war, and throughout other public events, flow quieter sources of life, often deeper and more powerful than what the revealed world shows the eye, and which nevertheless continue, powerfully erupting in state, church and literature.*  
(Varnhagen von Ense 1846 [1829], 3)

However, these currents have also been subjected to subsequent revision, domestication, and 'orthodoxification.' In the revisions, it is clearly the otherworldly, multidimensional, and eschatological elements which are excised. Once this revisionist outlook seeped into the everyday life of the community, we are left with congregations ready to settle into the world and make peace with its institutions.

Because the Moravian Brethren were never apocalyptic in the sense that, say, the Society of Mother Eve was, they have not subsequently been regarded as a radical sect. However, in the early years, they were under much suspicion from the authorities and church leaders. The congregation had been gripped by apocalyptic fervour on several occasions. I have drawn attention to a couple of examples above, but another example is the children's awakening in 1726, which caused a tremendous emotional stir through the community (Van Gent 2015; Schmid 2016). And it is precisely this question of emotion that is so significant and why it makes sense to think of Zinzendorf as apocalyptic and subjected to otherworldly influence: emotion is not only something from the inside, but something that can attack or influence people from the outside. There is much more work to be done in this field (but see Petterson, forthcoming).

## Source Materials

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### His own publications

Zinzendorf was a prolific writer and there is an enormous amount of material from his hand, as well as an even larger amount about him. The Archives of the Moravian Brethren in Herrnhut, Germany, and the Moravian Archives Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, hold a vast amount of material by and about Zinzendorf and the history of the Moravian Brethren. The manuscripts are in eighteenth-century handwritten German, of which Zinzendorf's handwriting is a particularly challenging example; much material has been published in the *Hauptschriften* (Key Writings) in six volumes by Olms Verlag, and in the additional supplementary volumes 1-16.

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